

RELUCTANT MARTIAN

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In a time when humans have colonized Mars, one woman finds herself in an interplanetary race to save her son and learns that the immigrant experience transcends space and time.

Decades ago, my son and I were the first victims of interplanetary child abduction. It was late fall 2133 when I went to Aldus' mother's house at our normal meeting time to pick up our 6-year-old son, Idris. I expected Aldus to be late as usual. His mother and I chatted for half an hour before trying to call Aldus, both of us met with disconnected service on the other end. Around the fourth attempt, I received an alert that Idris' minor locator was inactive. The screen flashed *ERROR: CODE 323*.

323 wasn't a battery or software error. I didn't recognize it. I looked up the error code and lost my breath. *EXTRATERRESTRIAL. NO SATELLITE SERVICE*.

I quickly learned that Aldus had taken Idris on Virgin's cislunar transit vehicle (CLTV) that left three days earlier, VCLTV-86. If they hadn't already boarded the Mars transit ferry, they would be boarding soon.

I didn't have a lunar visa, much less a Mars visa. Even if I had a lunar visa, I was probably out of time. The only way I could intercept them would be to pay off some pirates, and I had no time to interview pirates. Even if I could get there, cislunar transit logistics were a nightmare. I'd have to somehow get to their terminal without a visa, and board their ship without a ticket. I'm pretty sure that's what pirates help a damsel do, but there were too many uncertainties.

My only option was a morgue ferry. The sea floor was the only place left to "bury" a loved one on Earth and almost all earthen graveyards had been transplanted to the seabeds. A significant chunk of the unpressurized vessels leaving Earth those days were full of swanky, pressurized space coffins for the deceased.

I had a friend whose beloved grandmother was buried on Venus orbit back in 2110, and she joined thousands of others who were the first to watch their loved ones transit the sun in 2117. Mars was off limits for a long time due to the same environmental concerns we had on Earth, but had recently become an option because earthlings successfully lobbied for the right to send their deceased to their martian relatives, who could bury family in actual ground.

I went to four crematories before I found a cremator who would accept my bribe. For a year's worth of my mortgage, Noelle fixed the death certificate on a John Doe to indicate he was meant to be a Mars morgue ferry passenger, and she even got me the coffin. At 290 lbs, this John Doe was a hefty fella who qualified for a c-class coffin, providing me with plenty of room for supplies. She called Wagen Morgue, a privately owned ferry that she was friendly with. She claimed that the city morgue had delivered a morgue ferry by mistake, saying she had already located his coffin from the family. She arranged for them to pick up the fat man the next day. We eulogized him before sending him into the pyre.

I had my ride secured, but no way of surviving it unless I could find a pressurized suit with a life pack

and shit bags. That would get me to about 200 lbs, leaving me another 90 for food and water – way more than I needed for three days to cislunar, two days to wait for rendezvous, then a maximum few hours into the trek to Mars.

Noelle was already knee deep in this, so I didn't feel out of line asking her to help me get a suit. Her friend had done two lunar excursions before he was grounded due to tax evasion. He had no use for his suit, and it would be big for me, but it was available – cash only, of course. I gave him half of the cash I had left.

Morgue ferries are a one-shot these days, but back then it was more complicated. Wagen Morgue operated on a two-rocket, three-ship rotational loop with Wagens Eins, Zwei, and Drei. In the perpetual rotation, one Wagen was always in refurbishment in Mars orbit, while two were in transit.

My deceased mates and I happened to be Wagen Zwei, which launched one day ahead of the crew, who were in Wagen Eins. I stayed in Wagen Zwei, inside my pressurized coffin, doffed in a suit and surrounded by food, water, and extra waste receptacles. I had just enough room for a small backpack of random items. I brought Ambien to keep myself knocked out as much as possible, a hard drive, a deck of cards, and a holobook.

I waited patiently in cislunar for the commander and co-pilot to arrive aboard Wagen Eins. I felt the docking systems activate and the Wagens mate. The systems spun up and within an hour we were moving fast. I couldn't tell exactly when we had left lunar orbit, but gave it a few hours before I activated my suit, opened the coffin, and tripped the atmospheric monitors. Wagen Zwei was in dormant mode, so it took about 45 minutes for me to actually get the alarms to sound.

Darrell Hall, the co-pilot, entered to investigate. He floated in, and as he turned to shut the hatch, I kicked off the wall to present myself nonthreateningly into his view. I couldn't see his face because he was in a pressure suit like me, but social cues told me that he freaked the fuck out. I hadn't thought about how to not give a heart attack to the poor soul who discovered me.

Daniel Pitchford was the ship's commander. I can't say that Pitchford and Hall were angry, because their reaction extended far beyond angry. I had put their reputation on the line, and they were super pissed at Noelle. I tried desperately to not implicate her, but I realized she and I hadn't thought through how I would actually keep her clean – there just wasn't any time for that in the two days we spent together. I folded within hours, completely selling her out.

After they came to terms with the fact that they weren't going to kill me and put me back in my coffin, Pitchford and Hall were true professionals about my existence and drain on their ship. They really had no choice but to deal with me until they could drop me on Mars in seven months.

They taught me how keep ship and perform routine maintenance. We ate, exercised, watched TV, and kept ship. In gestures of good will, I skipped meals whenever I could, and made sure to complete my daily chores early in order to take on theirs whenever possible. I forced them to play poker and black jack, gambling with money I was going to give them anyway. It would be worthless on Mars, so I didn't care about losing, which turned out to be a winning strategy.

We'd been landing humans on Mars for almost a hundred years by then. It was painfully primitive at first, but it had become a relatively routine and mild experience.

Unfortunately I wasn't on a human lander, I was descending on a cargo lander with a bunch corpses who were tightly secured in their coffins, and, obviously, already dead. I helped Daniel and Darrell move all the other coffins into the lander, then I said goodbye to them as they sealed me in. Last one in, first one out.

If I could take back anything in my life, it would be the descent to Mars on a cargo lander. I vomited in my mouth and tried to swallow it, even though the guys told me the suit would suck it right up. They were mostly right, except for the chunks that flooded my nostrils and stuck to my eyebrows. The descent was violent. My suit was made for a man, so I pissed all over. I took laxatives for days to evacuate my bowels, but apparently I didn't take enough. As we crashed through the atmosphere, I told myself that those few minutes were the worst, but then the balloons deployed and I braced for the first bounce to snap my neck.

I awoke to the sound of a retrieval convoy approaching the lander. I think I was face down or maybe upside down, but definitely immobile, with no way to reposition myself. As soon as I heard them pop the hatch and get within earshot of my coffin, I began to yell, kick and bang for attention. They heard me immediately.

I again experienced the stages of surprise associated with being discovered in a morgue: Fear, shock, anger, acceptance, anger again and finally, offloading me to someone else. In this case I was offloaded to an infirmary because I clearly smelled like I needed medical attention and I had some broken ribs and fingers. Mars Customs Control took custody of me next, and had already contacted Aldus and Idris, whom they had just processed weeks before. With no way to get me off the planet, they offloaded me to Aldus.

Life on Mars was horrible. I didn't understand why anyone would choose to live here. As the only illegal alien on Mars, I couldn't work or vote. They didn't know what to do with my illegal status other than strip me of basic human rights.

Without a Citizen card, I couldn't work or get a housing permit. Couple that with my Earth custody of Idris meaning nothing on Mars, we were forced to live with Aldus. I hadn't thought this through.

True, I had my darling, giggling son. Together, Idris and I missed the beach, the slopes, and just being outside. He excelled in Academy, and we lived reluctantly with Aldus in a somewhat accepting community, considering my stigma and status. Idris was young enough that his memories of Earth eventually faded with little residual nostalgia.

Aldus worked on a solar farm. One sol, returning back to post on an open convoy, his suit suffered a stress puncture, flailing him out of the transporter where he writhed to death in the red sand. By the time they were able to turn around and reach him, he was long gone. People were suspicious of me, and rightfully so. I performed his regular suit maintenance and it would have been really easy to slowly inflict a stress puncture over the course of months.

Every sol I yearned for Earth. It wasn't until after Aldus met his fate that they finally let me work. I got a maintenance position at one of the soma spas, cleaning floors and refreshing towels. My unprecedented illegal worker status provided me with basic soma – access granted to every human on Mars except for me until that point. My employment at the spa elevated that basic access, granting me virtual entry to a world that I had been deprived of for a very long time.

Soma exponentially improved my quality of life through immersion in simulated Earth senses – the sounds of birds, the gusts of wind, even the scents of fresh-cut grass and fireworks. I once filled in for a girl at a soma spa that had real Earth seawater and simulated waves. It catapulted me into short-lived deep depression, uprooting memories I had tried to forget about Earth's beaches. I didn't take shifts from that spa again.

I watched Idris grow to be a model Mars citizen, despite me, a stain on his Citizen record. He graduated top of the Academy of Engineering Citizens. Rising to the prestigious rank of Foreman, he now leads major construction projects that allow the martian population to grow beyond what I ever thought conceivable.

It wasn't until Dad arrived that I had full appreciation for those pressurized coffins that kept me alive all those years ago. My stepmother followed soon after, then my brothers, and suddenly I was receiving extended family that I barely knew. Seeing those faces again, in the flesh, and even touching them may sound foul, but it helped me to make peace with my permanent separation from Earth.

Now I'm an old lady, the first illegal martian. The doyenne of aliens, if you will. I volunteer at the local alien cellblock, counseling the misled souls who thought they could flee their troubles on Earth, stowing away for a "free" life on Mars. I was lucky to be the first, grandfathered into an accepting community.

Idris and his wife spawned my first-generation martian grandchildren, who I swear grow faster than earthlings. They constantly pester me to regale them with tales of Earth. I relish it, and although I'm still wary of telling them about a superior existence, I have to remind myself each time that to them it's just fantasy.